

Radio Officer Completes 20th Year on Force, 16 as Captain

By JOHN MUNGER

Radio Captain Darwin "Lefty" Covert is believed to have been a police captain longer than anyone in the history of the local force.

Covert, who today completes his 20th year on the department, has been captain of the radio division for the past 16 years, despite several changes in city administrations.

Although he's eligible to retire on pension now that he's served 20 years, 50-year-old Covert says he has no plans to leave police work.

"Police radio is more challenging today than it was when I was new to it," the slender, crew-cut veteran said today. "When I came on the force as a radio operator, it was interesting mainly because police radio was a newcomer to the profession. But every piece of equipment we get today features some new electronic development or other."

50 Radio Vehicles

Captain Covert recalls there were only seven radio-equipped vehicles served by his division's transmitter when he started as an operator in 1938. Today there are more than 50 police vehicles equipped with radio, mostly receive-transmitter combinations.

In 1938, five squad cars, the sergeant's car and the fire chief's

vehicle were in the police radio network. (The fire department has its own network now, as does the Vanderburgh County sheriff's office, both of which originally relied upon the police department for radio communications.)

Worth \$30,000 Now

Radio equipment then — including the 50-watt amplitude modulation (AM) transmitter at headquarters — was valued at about \$5000. Present equipment would cost about \$30,000 to replace, Covert estimates. The figure includes value of the 250-watt frequency modulation (FM) transmitter and the tall antenna completed last year.

While there's far more radio equipment used today, the number of men assigned to the division hasn't increased correspondingly. Covert's appointment brought the staff to five, compared to seven today.

Covert has seen the number of call-boxes dwindle from about 140 to three. The call-box phones were located along beats patrolled by officers and permitted regular check-ins and emergency calls to headquarters. Radio almost eliminated the need for telephone communications between officers on the beat and headquarters.

Remaining call boxes are at Garvin Street and Lincoln Avenue

on Third Street near Main and on Second Street near Fulton Avenue.

A Tri-State radio network has come into being since Covert joined the department. About 1940, radio communications were established with Henderson, Ky., police.

Other cities were gradually linked by radio over the years until today local police operators can communicate directly with nearly a score of other police departments in Indiana, Illinois and Kentucky.

Communications by relay are possible with any radio-equipped police department in the country. The network often has been responsible for quick apprehension of fleeing felons. And its ability to establish road-blocks hurriedly is generally considered to discourage bank robberies and other crimes.



Evansville's new police chief, Darwin "Lefty" Covert, gets his morning coffee from his wife, Jeannette, at 1100 Rosemarie —the headquarters of the chief's "other job," operating a ham radio station.

Another Evansville Profile 1960

Covert Made Sure He Would Be Boss if Appointed Chief

(The first of two profiles on Evansville's newest city officials — Police Chief Darwin Covert and Fire Chief Fred Houghland.)

By LARRY HAMMERSTEIN

It's no secret that Darwin "Lefty" Covert, unlike several other candidates, did not ask to become police chief.

Less than two hours before he was named to the job two weeks ago he told Mayor Frank McDonald he would not take the appointment under just any conditions.

"I thought I'd talked myself out of the job," he said. "I said that if I were chief we'd have to follow the law right down the line. But the mayor and I found we agreed on every particular."

Born in Georgia

Covert sat at his desk in the

at the age of two. "I was born in Marietta, Ga., where my father worked for the L. & N. Railroad," said Covert. "The family headed north when the railroad transferred him here."

Like a lot of other railroaders, the Coverts lived in Howell, and "Lefty" went to Howell Grade School (now Daniel Wertz). Another school was opened about that time and from the seventh grade through high school the "skinny Covert boy" trudged up Coalmine Hill to Reitz High School.

"I was always pretty small in school," said Covert. "I went out for football, but didn't earn a letter."

Played Baseball

But he pitched and played outfield for the Panther baseball team to start a career that lasted through several seasons in semi-professional baseball. He never played

and reached Russian 'hams' four or five times."

Universal Language

Covert says English seems to be the universal language of the amateurs — probably because there are so many stations in this country.

"A 'ham' always has a common interest to talk about," said Covert. "You don't talk politics with Russians. You talk about equipment and radio conditions."

He remembers his work during the 1937 flood as the most exciting. "We dispatched evacuation boats, and handled Red Cross messages from Reitz High for 17 days without leaving."

Few complaints were heard when Covert was named chief Dec. 31. He is well respected by fellow officers and considered a hard worker. One officer pointed out that while he served in his permanent merit system rank of

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Covert sat at his desk in the green-carpeted chief's office and discussed his shock at learning of the appointment.

"When I left the mayor," said the new chief, "he told me he hadn't decided yet." A few hours later he was informed that he had been appointed.

"Lefty" Covert first saw the city of Evansville 50 years ago

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But he pitched and played outfield for the Panther baseball team to start a career that lasted through several seasons in semi-pro leagues. He remembers playing, on occasion, against another locally-known semi-pro baseball player — Evansville's new fire chief Fred Houghland. It was from his left-handed pitching prowess that Covert inherited the nickname of "Lefty."

He was graduated from Reitz in 1926 and went to work with the L. & N. as an electrician apprentice. Then came the depression and he lost the job, but found the employment which would lead him to police work.

Fascination for Radio

Radio was in its infancy in the early 1930s, and for "Lefty" it became a fascination which grew in intensity.

"As a youngster I made crystal receiving sets," said Covert. "I'd use one of those cylindrical oatmeal boxes and a coil of wire. It was a real challenge."

Covert started a "very small" radio repair shop, and later worked for a local radio appliance firm.

In 1934 and 1935 he taught a night school course in radio at Central High. The subject matter was radio technology and enough code so that students could pass an examination for an amateur license.

In 1935 the Chrysler plant opened here and Covert took a job as an electrician helping to install a new electrical system in the buildings.

Then a Blind Date

One day a friend came to him with a problem. He had a date that night to go to a movie, and his girl had a friend. Would "Lefty" care to come along?

"Well, you never know how a blind date is going to turn out," smiled Covert. This one soon led to a few more. In October of 1937 he and his wife, Jeannette, were married. She is now employed in the production material control office at Arkla.

Covert's desire to work with radio was still too strong to be ignored.

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Looks Younger Than 52

Covert has a slim athletic build, and despite the fact his closely cut hair is streaked with grey, he looks to be younger than his 52 years.

He scoffs at rumors heard last month that Mayor McDonald would run the department no matter who was appointed chief.

"The responsibility is mine," said Covert. "I will make the decisions and run the force. Naturally, the mayor will join in formation of policy, but we found we agreed on policy before I was appointed."

He says his appointment means he will face four years of pressures from different sides — trying to please everyone at once. But, he is confident there will be no political pressures from the administration.

Interest in All Police Work

Covert intends to press for more men and equipment for the department, but at the same time he plans to make a study of the present duties of policemen with an eye toward possible redistribution of manpower. He plans to take a look at establishing police precincts. He favors comprehensive training for recruits, possibly with help from universities, and on-the-job refresher courses for older officers.

"After I came on the force I found an interest not just for radio, but for all phases of police work," said Covert. "It's always a challenge."

NEXT: A Fireman from A Fire Fighting Family.

Gash Drops One Rank

1959
(1960)

Mayor-Elect Names Salm City Attorney

By ROBERT FLYNN

Darwin (Lefty) Covert is the new chief of Evansville's Police Department, and Jerome Salm will be city attorney.

The appointment of the 52-year-old Covert, a veteran of 21 years' police experience, was announced at noon today by Mayor-elect Frank McDonald—12 hours before each of them will take over his new duties.

Covert's present and permanent title on the department is inspector in charge of internal services. He will replace Charles Gash, who will become assistant police chief — the rank he received under the Police Merit Commission.

Although Covert was mentioned as a possibility for the chief's position, he had not actively sought it. He said today the appointment came as a surprise.

For the past several weeks, however, it was an open secret that McDonald was to make his choice from Covert and Lieut. Alvah Simms, the officer in charge of the department's training program.

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A native of Marietta, Ga., Covert has lived in Evansville 50 years and is a graduate of Reitz High School. He lives at 1100 Rosemarie with his wife, Jeannette.

Joined Force in 1938

He joined the Police Force in May, 1938, under the late Mayor William H. Dress, as a radio operator. Most of his police career has been in the communications division, which he has headed for 16 years.

Covert's training in electronics was gained through informal studies and as a "ham" operator. Before his police days, he was an electrician for the L. & N. Railroad and Chrysler Corporation.

A soft-spoken, apparently easy going and polite man, he is well liked by fellow policemen.

The appointment of Salm, McDonald's personal attorney, as city attorney confirmed a rumor started more than a month ago. Salm was an assistant city attorney during the Dress-Diekman administration and owns the Salm chain of department stores.

Another aspirant for the Police Chief position—Everett McIntire, the present assistant chief, is reportedly picked to head the traffic engineer's office on a temporary basis.

McDonald, however, said today that appointment was still in the "speculation" stage.

In the normal course of affairs, McIntire would be transferred tomorrow to the record room, where he has the rank of captain. He will have 20 years police service by next July and will then be eligible for his pension—figured at half the base pay of a patrolman.

McDonald said today he had



DARWIN COVERT
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FRED HOUGHLAND
Fire Chief

not yet made his choice on who would take the engineer's post now held on an "acting" basis by John O'Connor. Under law, the holder of that office must have a degree in traffic engineering.

The mayor-elect last night announced that Fred Houghland would head the Fire Department.

The 57-year-old Houghland, a 28-year veteran in the department, is the second member of his family to have that post. His brother Alex was chief in 1948 before taking the position of state fire marshal under Gov. Henry Shrickler.

Alex Houghland, now retired, lives in Florida.

Fred Houghland replaces Fire Chief Delmar Ice, who will now be an assistant chief, along with Thomas Gilkey.

Thomas Stalling, the present first assistant chief, will retain that title in the next administration.

McDonald also announced the creation of a new title—district chief. The four men who will hold that title, he said, will be Arthur James, Fred Koehler, Claude Taylor, and Joseph Mattingly.

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"The police radio system was installed here in 1936, and consisted of a 50-watt transmitter with receivers in just five cars," said Covert. An expansion program was begun in 1938, and Covert applied his self-taught knowledge to the build-up.

Promoted to Captain

Soon he was being considered an expert in communications. He was promoted to captain in 1942 and remained at that rank for 16 years through several changes of city administrations—a remarkable feat in pre-merit system days and a record for the police force.

Today Covert has retained many of his earlier interests, including sports and radio.

"I'm in the duffer class as a golfer," he grinned. "And I love to watch football, baseball and basketball." He's a strong fan of the Evansville College Aces.

There's a room set aside at the Covert home, 1100 Rosemarie, for radio station W9KVE. As a "ham" operator Covert has talked to others the world over.

"I've talked to just about any country you can name," said Covert. "I've talked to a missionary in the wilds of Borneo,

we agreed on policy before I was appointed."

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